

GENERAL SYNOD**National Day of Prayer and Action for the Persecuted Church around the World****Summary**

General Synod motion GS 2365A requests that the Archbishops' Council work ecumenically with other churches to establish a national day of prayer and action for the persecuted Church around the world. This is an important issue which requires the Church's ongoing attention and engagement. If Synod approves this proposal it will be necessary to work with the national ecumenical instruments, partner churches, the wider Anglican Communion and relevant organisations. It will also involve considering existing relevant dates, events and projects so that the Church can make a positive contribution which benefits all those who face restrictions of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Introduction

1. General Synod has been asked to consider a proposal on behalf of London Diocesan Synod which asks the Archbishops' Council to work ecumenically with other churches to establish a national day of prayer and action for the persecuted Church around the world.
2. The proposal refers to a motion passed at the February 2022 Group of Sessions relating to the persecuted Church (item 18 on the Agenda, as amended). The background for this discussion can be found in GS 2252A and GS 2252B. This motion called on dioceses to pray for and 'offer support to link dioceses where the Church is facing persecution'.
3. This built on a 2021 Report to General Synod, *The Church - An Advocate for Freedom of Religion or Belief* (GS187), which documented how the world is an increasingly hostile place for FoRB and the measures that the Church can take to uphold this human right as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent international conventions.
4. The 2021 report set out the myriad of relations the Church of England has with the world-wide Church through the Anglican Communion and global ecumenical bodies, such as the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches. It showed how the Mission and Public Affairs Council has pressed the Government to strengthen Whitehall's capacity to promote and protect FoRB for everyone, everywhere. It documented the extensive programme of work on FoRB, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that the Church is taking forward in West Africa, East Africa and South Asia. Much of this work is ongoing.
5. In addressing this motion, Synod should take note of existing work and the wider ecumenical context in which this work takes place. It is important that the Church continues to make a positive contribution to this area of work and maximises its impact by working in partnership with others.
6. Of particular importance is the work contributing to and flowing from the Independent Review, often called the Truro Review, after its Chair the then Bishop of Truro, the Rt Revd Philip Mounstephen, who was tasked with mapping the extent and nature of the

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global persecution of Christians; to assess the quality of the response of the FCDO, and to make recommendations for changes in both policy and practice.

7. In the broadest terms, the Review found that the FCDO's approach to the issue was inconsistent, with significant local variations in approach, and tended to underestimate issues of faith as an issue in the discriminatory treatment of minorities. Whilst the Review was tasked with examining the phenomenon of Christian persecution, its recommendations were clearly framed in terms of FoRB for all, as a matter of principle, and argued that FoRB should be central to the FCDO's culture, policies and international operations.
8. The Government has accepted the recommendations in full and the direct consequences of the Review can be seen in the UK hosting a major international ministerial Conference on FoRB in 2022; chairing the recently formed intergovernmental International Freedom of Religion or Belief Alliance; and co-sponsoring a UN Security Council resolution on the issue in 2024. The Church is now working with others to advocate for their implementation while being alert to new challenges requiring fresh thinking and innovative responses. The UK FoRB Forum which was set up after the Review has played a helpful role in this by bringing together 90 civil society groups to make common cause on the issue, and to examine how this issue intersects with other global concerns such as gender rights and climate change
9. There are already a number of events and activities linked to freedom of religion or belief. There are many organisations and campaigns that call on Anglican congregations to focus their attention on important issues on specific days, weeks, months or years; in addition to the commemorations and festivals of the Liturgical Year. General Synod will need to consider the implications of this in relation to the proposed national day of prayer for the 'persecuted Church'.

The Challenge

10. The Church's understanding of human dignity is such that it is concerned whenever and wherever the right to freedom of religion or belief is infringed. Christians hold that everyone, everywhere is made in the image of God. As such, the Church has always argued that governments should prioritise the most serious violations of FoRB rather than a specific community.
11. The suffering of Christians worldwide is one of deep, heartfelt and immediate concern to the Church, but such concern does not overshadow or take precedence over other FoRB violations. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, nothing is known of the traveller, who is stripped of clothing, beaten and left half dead alongside the road, although the strong implication is that he is Jewish. This makes a challenging statement, given the good neighbour is a Samaritan.
12. In the field of FoRB, 'persecution' is an unfortunately nebulous and generic term that is highly evocative but hard to define. It recalls the violent and cruel atrocities committed by terrorist and non-state actors like Boko Haram in Nigeria or Isis in Iraq, as well as notorious blasphemy cases such as that of Asia Bibi in Pakistan. But such violence against marginalized religious or belief communities often goes hand in hand with, and is facilitated by, legally mandated discrimination at the national level and/or unchecked and pervasive prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes. In numerous countries,

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individuals and communities are denied their fundamental rights to their religious or belief identities from the day they are born.

13. Given the difficulty in defining what constitutes persecution, bodies like the Pew Research Centre, a US based non-partisan think tank, have focused on the potential rather than actual FoRB violations by estimating the number of people who live in countries with high or very high levels of religious or belief restrictions and societal hostility.
14. On 5 March 2024 Pew released its fourteenth annual survey on the status of FoRB worldwide. Due to the amount of work involved in collecting the data and creating the report – which covers 198 countries and territories– the period it covers is 2021. The survey found that overall FoRB has continued to decline, paralleling the global deterioration of democracy and human rights in general. It found that government restrictions on religion – laws, policies and actions by state officials that limit religious beliefs and practices – reached a new peak globally. Harassment of religious groups and interference in worship were two of the most common forms of government restrictions worldwide in 2021.
15. Pew observes that Christians and Muslims have generally faced harassment in a larger number of countries than any other group, but it notes that they represent the two largest religious groups in the world. It says that “this figure is not a measure of the severity of harassment, and it should not be interpreted to mean that these religious groups are necessarily the world’s ‘most persecuted’”. The Report also showed that Jews were harassed by governments and social groups or individuals in 91 countries in 2021 (down from 94 countries in 2020), the third highest total of any religious group, although Jews make up just 0.2% of the world’s population.
16. In addition to the in-depth and nuanced research done by Pew, Open Doors an international NGO that supports vulnerable Christians in more than 70 countries produces an annual World Watch List ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the ‘most extreme persecution.’ It defines Christian persecution as “any hostility experienced as a result of proclaiming the name of Jesus.”
17. In its 2024 Report it concluded that 317 million Christians face ‘very high or high levels of persecution’ across its ranking. This equates to 1 in 7 Christians worldwide. Geographically, it found that one in five Christians face persecution in Africa and two in five Christians face persecution in Asia. The top five countries are: North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Eritrea and Yemen.

Ecumenical Partnerships

18. We work with our partner denominations in the UK through the ‘ecumenical instruments’, in particular Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and Churches Together in England (CTE). Both of these bodies are already involved in FoRB issues and would be the appropriate bodies to facilitate a national day of prayer for the persecuted Church. They also have ‘Networks and Charities in Association’ which include charities with a concern for persecuted Christians, including Open Doors.
19. In addition, there are ecumenical organisations which bring Christians together for prayer, including the National Day of Prayer and Worship (NDPW) which coordinates large scale prayer events and is led by Pentecostal churches. Staff of the Faith and Public Life’s Public Policy team already work very closely with the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief and its FoRB Learning Platform to produce

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learning resources to help individuals understand and promote freedom of religion or belief for all.

20. We have partner churches who have an interest in this area of work, including the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) does a lot of work supporting persecuted Christians and is a pontifical foundation. ACN arranges **#RedWednesday** on a Wednesday in late November every year which is a day in remembrance of the suffering faithful, as well as an opportunity to show solidarity with other religious groups suffering religious persecution and bigotry. In Pope Francis' recent Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee year of 2025, the Holy Father extended a special invite to Eastern Christians to visit Rome during the **Year of Jubilee**, in part because "they have suffered greatly, often even unto death, for their fidelity to Christ and the Church, and so they should feel themselves especially welcome in this City of Rome".
21. There are other existing programmes of prayer for the persecuted church, including **The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**. This happens on the first Sunday in November and is marked by a number of UK charities including Open Doors, Evangelical Alliance, CSW and Release International. It is consciously linked to the Liturgical Year as a time when we remember the saints and martyrs.
22. Sam Miller (the Director of Strategic relations at Open Doors) has said that 'As much as a day to highlight persecution is a valuable contribution for awareness, the more vital contribution is a consistent prayerful commitment to stand with Christians who are facing the daily realities of persecution for their faith and witness. Persecution is a daily reality, and our prayers make a vital contribution to the daily resilience of persecuted Christians.'
23. There are also internationally recognised days for protecting freedom of religion or belief. In May 2019, the United Nations General Assembly voted to designate the 22 August of each year as **the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief**. This is an invitation to all Member States, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations, as well as civil society and the private sector, to observe the International Day.

Conclusion

24. The Church's understanding of human dignity is such that it is concerned whenever and wherever the right to freedom of religion or belief is infringed. The Church continues to press that governments should prioritise the most serious violations of FoRB rather than a specific community. The suffering of Christians worldwide is one of deep, heartfelt and immediate concern to the Church, but such concern does not overshadow or take precedence over other FoRB violations. It may often be the case, however, that the Church has a stronger focus to address violations affecting Christians, even though it rightly supports and advocates this right for all.
25. There are already a number of dates that are used in connection to 'persecution'; for example Red Wednesday, The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. It may be better for the Church of England to raise awareness of these dates rather than create another one.

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26. In taking this work forward General Synod will need to consider what the Church of England can do to make a difference to those affected. It may be more helpful for us to actively support existing initiatives rather than create something new. Members of General Synod may want to consider what this might involve. Whatever we do, we will have greatest impact if we work in partnership with other churches and organisations, including the national ecumenical instruments.

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